

On the Study of Classical Political Philosophy (1938)

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[Plan of the Lecture]^a

On the study of classical political philosophy^b

1. Three approaches to it: dogmatic, historic, and philosophic.
2. Aristotle the model of philosophic approach.
3. Essential shortcoming of Aristotle's method: his neglect of the form in which Plato's political teaching is presented.
4. The form, i.e., exotericism, is characteristic not only of Plato, but likewise of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon.
5. Reason of exotericism: opposition between theoretical and political life.

To explain both the reason leading to exotericism and the fact that it is usually not sufficiently considered somewhat more fully, we may say that we usually understand that bearing of what may fairly be called the most epoch-making event in the history of literature as such in general. Persecution and education.

6. The original methods of exoteric presentation: myth and history.
7. Exotericism and irony: irony of Herodotus, shown by the use of an archaic

^a Both the handwritten plan and the typescript that follows can be found in the Leo Strauss Papers, box 6, folder 6, and were transcribed by J. A. Colen, reviewed by Christopher Lynch and Svetozar Minkov, and annotated by Christopher Lynch.

^b Immediately to the right of this handwritten title, in the upper-right-hand corner of the page, is the handwritten note: "The dialectic of the dialogues is only an imitation of the *true* dialectics (Cf. *Rep.* 348a–b)." The identical title also appears in typescript at the beginning of section 1 but is not reiterated here; above and to the left of that typed title is written by hand, "Not more than 27 pages." Above and to the title's right is written by hand, "22.11–27.11.38," and beneath that, "27.12.38–," indicating that some portion of the lecture was written between November 22, 1938, and November 27, 1938, and that another portion was written (or intended to be written) between December 27, 1938, and some later date, probably early in 1939. We nonetheless take 1938 as the year of composition since Strauss supplied no end date and since the extant lecture is incomplete.

language (see Regenbogen)^a *tetharsekotes toisi ornisi*:^b irony of Thucydides (see Marcellinus).^c

The exoteric speech is a speech which gives the untruth an apparent [unreadable]¹¹ over the truth. → Aristotle's definition of the *eiron*.^d

8. The Socratic method: having talks on the market about things human exclusively, i.e., dialogue.

The evidence of the *Memorabilia* in favor of another interpretation of Socrates (cf. H. Weissenborn, Xenophon).^e

9. The Platonic method: combinations with drama, more exactly with comedy.

Drama and hiding.

10. The fact that Plato discusses the methods of writing and speaking compels us to devote particular interest to him—not to mention the fact that the *Republic*, the *Politicus*, and the *Laws* surpass in importance for the history of political philosophy everything written by Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon.

—*logographike anangke*^f

Plato never sets forth the truth in a plain way, but he always distorts it with regard to the *tropoi* of the individual interlocutors. We must deduct in each case the distortion caused by the nature of the interlocutors. Application to *Republic* and *Laws*: truth distorted with regard to Glaukon or to two old Dorians, in particular Kleinias.

11. Silence: the absence of something

—e.g., the total absence of Athens and letters in the *Cyropaedia*.

the absence of Kephalos in the *Republic* and the absence of Alkibiades and Critias in *Laches*.

the absence of Athens in the *Laws*.

The peculiar importance of the *Symposium*, where *the* representative of the *political* life has the last word.

The solitary meditation: cf. Socrates in the *Symposium*. Exoteric books more difficult to understand than esoteric books.

^a Apparently a reference to an article by Otto Regenbogen, *Herodot und sein Werk: Ein Versuch*, published in the journal *Die Antike* in 1930.

^b In Greek script; translation: “emboldened by the birds” (see Herodotus 3.76).

^c A reference to the *Life of Thucydides* by the Roman Marcellinus (consider especially lines 35 and 53).

^d In Greek script; translation: the ironic one, dissembler; an apparent reference to Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.7.

^e Apparently a reference to Hermann Weissenborn's 1910 commentary.

^f In Greek script; translation: logographic necessity.

12. Conclusion: the suggestion made in the present essay is the only alternative I can see to the method still predominant of subjecting the writings of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and Plato to what still is called higher criticism. The so-called results of higher criticism have been contested and refuted in a number of important instances by outstanding classical scholars, and we may notice that the view gains in strength that, in the absence of sufficiently clear and complete extant evidence, thorough interpretation and thorough understanding has to precede any attempt of higher criticism.

Yet we rarely meet with the admission that the very principle of higher criticism prevents its application to the works of masters of the art of writing. For higher criticism may be likened to a sort of surgery¹² or some other sort of medical treatment, which a healthy body is not in need of, but which without it do it only harm. But a good book may be compared with a healthy animal, i.e., with a self-sufficient being with a head and feet and middle parts of its own, which is capable of locomotion without needing crutches: a good book will fulfill its specific function, i.e., education and teaching, only if it is understood exclusively by itself.¹³

I

The traditional method of presenting the history of social or political ideas is more and more considered by modern historians to be inadequate. That method may be described as follows: the social and political doctrines of the various writers are summarized or analyzed, and¹⁴ the summary or analysis of each individual doctrine is followed by a definite judgment on the value of the doctrine in question. The assumption which underlies the use of that method by the modern historian is the opinion that he possesses a clear and distinct knowledge of the standard with reference to which he can judge the doctrines of the past.¹⁵ Now, knowledge of the standard is incomparably more important than is knowledge of earlier writers' right or wrong views of the standard. Consequently, these¹⁶ adherents of the traditional method whose knowledge of the standard precedes their study of the doctrines of the past¹⁷ are not compelled to study these¹⁸ doctrines¹⁹ with that high degree of interest, and therefore of attention and care, which an adequate understanding of them requires. Thus, the interpretation, given by²⁰ followers of the method, of the doctrines of the past cannot possibly be satisfactory. This censure is fully justified since it is directed against scholars who write books on history: on the history of social or political ideas.

The opponent of the traditional method whom I followed up to this point^a suggests that the shortcomings of that method cannot be avoided but by students who are “interested in history *qua*²¹ history.” Two consequences, or presuppositions, of his suggestion deserve to be emphasized. He asserts that the historian of social or political doctrines ought to take into account “their context in time and place, their context in society and culture.”²²

He naturally is aware of the two conditions which must be fulfilled before one can proceed along that line. First, one must dispose of a sufficiently detailed and well-established knowledge of the lives of the thinkers whose doctrines are to be explained with reference to their background; before one attempts a sociological explanation of the doctrines, the doctrines themselves must have been understood.²³ Whether a satisfactory knowledge of the lives can be obtained in all important cases may here remain an open question. But it may safely be said that in some important cases the attempt at understanding the doctrine takes up so much time that practically none is left for their sociological explanation;²⁴ or, in other words, in those cases the gradual²⁵ understanding of the doctrine makes us realize the redundancy of any explanation of the doctrine in terms of its social environment: a doctrine inaccessible to ordinary reading, and therefore to society, is for that reason proof against sociological explanation. But let us assume that the two conditions mentioned are fulfilled in all important cases: even then the fruitfulness of the approach suggested entirely depends on whether “the cultural and social background” of the political thinker in question actually had a decisive bearing upon the substance of his doctrine. The background²⁶ doubtless had such a bearing in the case of a number of outstanding modern political thinkers. But²⁷ those thinkers themselves had consciously and deliberately subjected their thought to social and political “reality” and, consequently, to the social and political “reality” of their time or of their nation: or is it because of their desire²⁸ to express “reality” that they became the competent spokesmen of their background?²⁹ At any rate,³⁰ it is largely due to the preponderant influence of Hegel’s view of philosophy on the history of philosophy that we are inclined to assume from the outset³¹ that Aristotle’s *Politics*, for example,³² is nothing other than an expression, or an analysis, of Greek political “reality.” But is the background necessarily decisive for the substance of man’s thoughts?³³ Would it do any

^a [LS note] Carl Mayer [review of *A History of Social Philosophy*, by Charles Ellwood]] in *Social Research*, vol. 5, [no. 3], Nov. 1938, pp. 490–93.

harm if one would stoop to reconsider the view, somewhat pushed into the background, that there was a time when men, if a rather limited number of men, did not think in order to express the “reality,” or the hopes and fears, of their time or of their nation or of their class, but in order to be able to look at things and men freely, in freedom, that is, from their background, from the prejudices of their time and of their nation and of their class? It seems as if the feeling that the great political thinkers of classical Greece were such men is³⁴ underlying the opinion, still cherished by a number of people, that those thinkers are teachers of mankind at large and for all times. As a matter of fact, their books show that they were such men, and that, therefore, no considerable profit accrues to the understanding of their teaching from musing over the political and learned affiliations, not expressly emphasized in their books, which they have had or may have had: their books must be understood, and can be understood, from themselves. For they have written them not for the delight, or for the profit, of the then present time only, but they have destined them to be, as one of them puts it, possessions for everlasting.^a And since they constantly had in mind “the end,” or “the beginning,” i.e., since they knew the instability of all things merely human, they looked beyond the boundaries not only of their Greek present, but likewise of a future which was merely Greek.^b

The demand that the student of the political doctrines of the past ought to be interested in “history *qua* history” contains the further implication “that the study of the great social philosophies of the past is of the highest significance and that they themselves are to be taken most seriously.” The opponent mentions in this connection with special emphasis the study of Aristotle, which “may be felt to be *directly* important for an understanding of the nature of the social sciences.” It is true, a strong case can be made for the view that Aristotle is *the* classic of political science. Yet, if we are truly willing to learn from Aristotle, we must be prepared to learn from him even such things which run counter even to the most impressive of our modern prejudices, i.e., to the historical prejudice. For is not Aristotle, whose views we are to take most seriously if we are to be real historians, the originator of that very traditional method which is combated in the interest of a historical approach? This is not to deny that there are differences between the

^a A reference to Thucydides 1.22.4.

^b [LS handwritten note] Cf. the remark of Hans Speier, “The Social Determination of Ideas,” *Social Research*, vol. 5 [no. 2, Summer 1938], especially pp. 194f. and 202f.

way in which Aristotle uses that method and the way in which it was used during the nineteenth century: Aristotle did not write a history of social or political ideas. That is to say, when discussing³⁵ the doctrine of an earlier writer on constitutions or on laws, he did not merely assert, by referring himself to the present stage of social or political research, the deficiency of the doctrine in question, but, in the spirit of the adage *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*,^a he took the trouble of proving his assertion; in other words, his discussion of earlier political views does not follow the establishment of the true doctrine, but it precedes that establishment and paves the way for it. What he would have objected to the manner in which his method of discussing earlier doctrines was used during the nineteenth century is then not that that manner was unhistorical, but that it was unscientific.

We may thus distinguish three different approaches to the study of classical political philosophy: the dogmatic approach, which was prevalent in the nineteenth century; the historical approach, which is prevalent in our time; and the philosophical approach. The eternal model of the third approach is Aristotle's discussion of the doctrines of his predecessors. This assertion is open to the objection that Aristotle's method is notoriously deficient, and that objection seems to be proved by the well-known shortcomings of his presentation of Plato's political teaching. It cannot be denied that³⁶ at a first glance we hardly recognize Plato's famous teaching when we read Aristotle's analysis of it. It would, however, be rash³⁷ to presume that Aristotle did not understand Plato; nor would it be less dangerous³⁸ to suggest that he was not fair to his teacher. In order to understand Aristotle's apparently strange presentation of Plato's political teaching, and thus to realize what the actual shortcoming of Aristotle's method is, we need only to consider the most striking difference between Aristotle's presentation of Plato's political teaching and Plato's own presentation of it: Aristotle ruthlessly omits all the solemn, all the impressive, all the poetic features of Plato's teaching. But Plato himself does not leave us in any doubt concerning the fact that he did not think very highly of solemn, and of impressive, and of poetical presentations of the truth. For he was no less interested than was Aristotle in the truth, the adequate presentation of which does not permit of the lies of poets or of orators or of sophists both recent and old. For one reason

^a A proverbial expression, translated literally, "Rhodes is here, jump here," and meaning: Stop boasting and prove your point. It is derived from Aesop's fable of a traveler who returns home from Rhodes to boast of his long-jumping victories there, only to be chastened by demands that he demonstrate at home what he claims to have done in Rhodes.

or the other, however, Plato chose to use playful and enthusiastic lies for presenting the serious and sober truth. The omission for which Aristotle is to blame—if he is to blame for it at all—is then simply this: he does not explain to us why Plato chose to present his political teaching in a poetical form. And this is the only essential³⁹ supplement which the Aristotelian method of presenting, and discussing, the political doctrines of the past requires: we have to consider certainly in a more explicit and coherent way than Aristotle himself has done the presentation of political teaching as it was practiced by Plato, for instance.

For it must be added at once that Plato was not the only teacher of political principles⁴⁰ in classical Greece who presented the truth, or what he believed to be the truth, in an unscientific manner: what holds true of Plato holds equally true of Herodotus, of Thucydides, and of Xenophon. Herodotus does not tire of telling us unbelievable stories invented either by others⁴¹ or by himself; Thucydides composes speeches of the most famous men of his time, which are too revealing of Thucydides' own judgment about those men to be true accounts of what these men actually said;⁴² Xenophon presents his political views most exhaustively in a life of Cyrus which is almost completely fictitious. All those writers, whose dominant interest was an interest in truth, chose for one reason or the other to teach the truth not in the form appropriate to truth, i.e., in scientific form, but by making use of an ingenious mixture of truth with fiction or lie. Presenting truth by such a mixture was called in antiquity exoteric presentation. The question with which the student of classical political doctrines is confronted at the threshold of his understanding those doctrines is the question of the reason leading to exoteric presentation of the truth.

To answer that question, one must have grasped first the esoteric teaching which is embedded into the exoteric speech, and which, to begin with, is almost completely hidden by the latter. By raising that question and by attempting to answer it, one does not, however,⁴³ go beyond the sphere of classical political thought. For it was precisely a political difficulty which the ancients overcame by devising exoteric presentation of truth.

The emergence of science in Greece was, in a sense,⁴⁴ disastrous to political life: the man of science, or the philosopher, was as such, i.e., as far as he lived a theoretical life, no longer a citizen of his city and a believer in the gods of his⁴⁵ city. Science made him critical not only of such and such a custom or law, but of custom and law as such: *nature*, the object of

science, is distinguished from, and opposed to, *law*.^a Yet man is a political being, and the philosopher is a man. He is therefore confronted with the question: how can the indisputable superiority of the theoretical life, which is essentially unpolitical, be brought into a certain harmony with the unavoidable necessity of leading a political life of some sort?⁴⁶ In other words, he is⁴⁷ confronted with this⁴⁸ question: how can the benefits proceeding from insight into the nature of things be made fruitful for the guidance of the unphilosophic multitude? The modern world has answered that question by devising popular science.⁴⁹ The classical thinkers answered it by devising exotericism, i.e., by devising a⁵⁰ disguised presentation of truth which is adapted to the popular mind, and yet at the same time appropriate for leading on those who are naturally able to become philosophers to a philosophic life.⁵¹

We usually underestimate the bearing of what may fairly be called the most epoch-making event in the history of literature as such⁵² in general.⁵³ That event was the⁵⁴ discontinuation of persecution of free thought which has taken place in⁵⁵ the eighteenth century. During the preceding periods, and in some countries even until a more recent date, persecution was, as it were, the natural condition to which public expression of free thought had to adapt itself. Expression of independent thinking was naturally discouraged and even prohibited, since such thinking is incompatible with the unreserved acceptance of the dominant beliefs, whatever those beliefs may be. Under those circumstances, an independent man was compelled to hide his thoughts more or less⁵⁶ carefully. Those independent thinkers who had the desire of transmitting their views to people whom they did not happen to know even by name, and who, therefore, had no choice but to publish the results of their reflections, were then confronted with this dilemma: how can one publish one's views and yet at the same time hide them? The solution which they discovered was based on a rather common observation, on the observation, that is, that most people are very poor readers: very few people are able⁵⁷ or willing to read between the lines. They became then

^a [LS note] This statement requires three explanatory remarks which are not meant to be restrictions. 1. The philosophers naturally preferred the rule of law to lawlessness. 2. *Nature*, being the order of things, could metaphorically be called *law*, with the understanding that that true law, which is nature, is distinguished from, and opposed to, law in the original sense of the word. 3. What Plato objects to is not the antithesis *nature-law*, or else he would not have written the *Crito* or the *Politicus*, but the pre-Socratic view of nature.

able to publish the results of their reflections, while hiding them, by writing books the lines of which were filled with orthodox statements, whereas the heterodox statements were to be read between the lines.

Generally speaking, that device was used in the same way by a man like Voltaire as by Herodotus,⁵⁸ for example. There is, however, one great and even decisive difference between the exoteric writers who are characteristic of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the exoteric writers of classical antiquity.⁵⁹ Whereas the former appealed from the majority of today to the majority of tomorrow, the latter appealed from the eternal majority to the eternal minority. That is to say, the former assumed that the reign of persecution would be superseded in the near or distant future by a reign of freedom of expression; the latter, however, had no such beliefs in the future:⁶⁰ they thought that only a minority of mankind is, and always will be, susceptible of true education. Consequently, the classical writers were able or compelled to hide their thoughts much more artfully than the champions of modern enlightenment. By thus compelling their readers to read most carefully, they gave them a kind of education which is perhaps not equaled in quality by any other kind of education devised ever since. Those writers were aware of the educational value of their manner of writing, and it is highly probable that they hid their views in order to select and to test and to educate a small minority rather than in order to protect themselves or their doctrines against persecution. But however this may be, one cannot understand the classical books in question adequately if one does not stop to consider the original occasion which brought men to hide their thoughts. For a close connection exists between the occasion, i.e., the fact of persecution, and the goal of true education: men were persecuted for independent thinking, and independent thinking is the goal of true education.

To begin with, there were two ways open for teaching the truth to⁶¹ a minority⁶² while hiding it from the vulgar, or, in other words, for teaching the truth in a manner consciously and deliberately adapted to the popular prejudices.⁶³ The first way was the discriminate use of myths or stories. From a practical point of view, the most important consequence of the discovery of *nature*, and of science, is the insight into the insignificance of human greatness and of human aspiration to greatness as compared with the truly great order of the universe. Insight into that order leads to moderation (*sophrosyne*), which as is shown by the experience of all men—of men of all times, and of all nations, and of all classes—is the *conditio sine qua non* of human happiness, or of all dignity⁶⁴ of both individuals and com-

munities. Now, man can be taught moderation by certain myths as well, by the myth, e.g., that the gods are jealous of human greatness or⁶⁵ of human aspiration to greatness, or by the myth that the naked soul of man, the soul deprived of all earthly goods,⁶⁶ has to give an⁶⁷ account of his deeds⁶⁸ after death. By the use of such myths, man can be taught “civil” moderation, i.e., a moderation which is indispensable for man as far as he is a citizen. But “civil” moderation is not true moderation, and the myths educating man in “civil” moderation are not true. In order to show this, i.e., in order to lead a minority of readers to the philosophic life, the exoteric writer inserts into the myths, or into their context, some subtle hints which will be grasped by those only who are fit to become philosophers.⁶⁹

The second way of teaching men moderation without disclosing to them the true view of nature, and the implications of that view, is writing history. Being under the spell of a tradition of historiography which goes back to an almost immemorial past, and of a less old tradition, which originally was a tradition of orators, of preferring history to philosophy, we naturally assume that the illustrious founders of historiography proper—such men as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon—took historiography as such to be an important and serious enterprise. Yet the strikingly unhistorical features of their works—features which in the case of such masters of historiography⁷⁰ cannot be explained as unintentional and unconscious deficiencies—ought to make us distrustful of our initial assumption. The more or less historical works of those masters appear at a first glance to be descriptions of great deeds of individuals or of communities. For the popular mind judges deeds to be more important than speeches, and within certain limits that judgment doubtless is sound. But it so happens that the truth cannot be attained or transmitted by deeds, but only by speech (*logos*).^a The true education to moderation would then be an education by true speech, by a speech revealing the nature of the universe and thus of man. But if one wants to teach the unphilosophic multitude moderation, one must show them by deeds rather than by speeches where *hybris* leads to, i.e., what the end of *hybris* is. It is for this reason that Herodotus describes the end of Persian *hybris*, and that Thucydides describes the end of Athenian *hybris*, and that Xenophon lets us have a glimpse at the end of the Spartan constitution and of Cyrus’

^a [LS note] The bearing of the *deed-speech*-antithesis for classical thought can most clearly be seen from a comparison of Plato’s *Apology* 32a4–5 with *Crito* 52d5. Those passages explain the cryptic statement of Socrates about his *daimonion* in *Apology* 31d3–4.

empire.—⁷¹ The teacher of moderation would be a mere preacher if he limited himself to a description of the end of *hybris* only. He will not effect purification (*katharsis*) from *hybris*⁷² but by first imitating, and thus letting⁷³ us experience in a concentrated manner, the incredible charm exercised by successful *hybris*; he has thus⁷⁴ to show to begin with⁷⁵ the greatness of the allegedly great men or communities in all its splendor, just as if he were fully convinced of the solidity of that greatness, without doing the least thing which could destroy our illusion; that is to say, he has to show us first that greatness in⁷⁶ the splendor of its gradual growth, a splendor which everybody would be inclined to compare with the rise of the sun. It is for this reason that Herodotus gives us such a vast description of the rise, which nobody could stop, of the Persian empire, and Thucydides gives us such a condensed and forcible description of Athens's inevitable rise to power, and Xenophon deals almost exclusively with Cyrus' brilliant ascent.—None of those masters discloses the end before its time has come: by only gradually disclosing the truth about *hybris*, he imitates the way in which the vulgar comes to realize that truth, for the vulgar does not realize it but by seeing the end "in deed, and not in speech." Yet the end of *hybris* can be seen from the very beginning, not, it is true, "in deed," but "in speech." It is for this reason that Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon disclose the end, which "in deed" is not shown before the end of their Histories, "in speech" from the very beginning of their works: they do this by using strange words or expressions, for example,⁷⁷ which are easily overlooked or misunderstood (and therefore mistranslated or emended or deleted) even by very learned readers.⁷⁸—The popular mind of ancient times knew of a kind of speeches which disclose the end a⁷⁹ long time before it has come about: the oracles were such speeches. Divination claims to be knowledge of the end. That claim is futile; yet divination may be used as a symbol, appealing to the popular mind, of that true science of the end which is rather knowledge of the nature, or of the "beginning" (*archê*), of man and of things. It is for this reason that we read so much in Herodotus and in Xenophon, and even in Plato, about oracles.—Teaching moderation by writing history is teaching by deeds, and not by speech. But as is indicated by the fact that the classical⁸⁰ teachers of moderation insert a considerable⁸¹ number of speeches into their accounts of deeds, teaching by deeds alone is hardly possible. And we may even doubt whether teaching by deeds is possible at all. For what else are those histories which apparently teach the truth by deeds only⁸² if not speeches? Those histories teach the truth—the truth about man in

particular, but therewith the truth about nature in general—by speech, if by exoteric speech.

II

To make the foregoing assertions somewhat more plausible than they may appear to be at first sight, they shall be illustrated by a brief discussion of the meaning of Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus*. It is generally^a

^a The typescript ends abruptly at this point.